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SCHWEITZER OUTLINES ENERGY-SAVING APPROACH

By Mike Dennison

HELENA - Gov. Brian Schweitzer on Monday unveiled a state panel's recommendations to reduce greenhouse gases in Montana and said state government will "lead by example" by cutting its energy consumption 20 percent in three years.

"We've watched them in Washington, D.C., talk about (global warming) for a number of years," Schweitzer said at a Capitol news conference. "It's time to take action."

Schweitzer said he'll also ask state agencies to have their vehicle fleets achieve an average miles-per-gallon of 30. If achieved, it would be the highest such standard in the nation, he said.

Schweitzer announced his efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as he received the final report from the 18-member Climate Change Advisory Committee, which he initiated two years ago.

The panel made 54 recommendations on how Montana can reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The recommendations cover such things as less energy consumption and new standards on power plant and other industrial emissions.

The recommendations are designed to help cut greenhouse gas emissions in Montana to 1990 levels by 2020.

Carbon dioxide, the waste from burning fossil fuels like coal, is one of the top greenhouse gases, which causes global warming.

Schweitzer and Department of Environmental Quality Director Richard Opper said the administration will examine the proposals and decide which ones it might pursue.

"There will be some time involved before we really sort through all of this and see what fits for the state," Opper said. "The steps we take will probably be different from what's in this report, but we will be taking steps and we'll have a lot to show."

Industry members of the Climate Change Advisory Committee also issued their own report on the committee recommendations, saying some could cause "economic harm" and needed more analysis before being adopted.

The recommendation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels is "one of the most ambitious" reductions in the nation and "may not be achievable and may very well result in economic harm," they wrote.

Tim Gregori, general manager for an electric cooperative that plans to build a coal-fired

power plant near Great Falls, was one of three panel members who submitted the industry comments.

"It's a little bit premature to take a hard stand on some of these issues," he said, noting that technology is still evolving on capturing carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas that causes global warming.

"That doesn't mean we want to do nothing," Gregori said. "But we can't move to the point where this is technologically achievable when it's not."

The industry members also said requiring utilities to have even higher levels of electricity from "renewable" sources is "a very difficult and arbitrary goal."

Montana requires electric utilities to have 15 percent of their power from renewable sources, like wind, by 2015. The committee recommended increasing that amount to 25 percent by 2025.

Opper agreed that achieving that goal might be difficult, but he said it's not arbitrary and that several other states have adopted the standard.

The committee report also noted that a dozen other states have greenhouse gas reduction goals that are similar to or more ambitious than the ones recommended for Montana by the report.

Opper said members of the panel "put aside their personal beliefs and worked together very well. We had a lively debate."

Its members include an organic farmer, a teacher, two state legislators, conservation and environmental representatives, a tribal representative and Gregori.

One recommendation Schweitzer said the state will follow is joining the Western Regional Climate Action Initiative, a collaboration of several Western states to address global warming issues.

The initiative is looking for ways that Western states can reduce emissions in the region.

Schweitzer said his push to reduce energy consumption by 20 percent by 2010 includes all state agencies and the University System. The state spends about \$24 million on electricity and natural gas a year. The governor said he would like to reduce it by \$4.8 million a year.

"There are some things that are very clear: If you want to reduce your hydrocarbon footprint, it means decreasing your consumption of hydrocarbons," he said. "This won't be easy. It means that we will have to be creative. If it was easy, we would have done it already."